

# Interpreting Historic Burying Grounds

## Boston's Initiative

Kathy Kottaridis

Jokes about old cemeteries abound in city government, the most popular connecting the care of the dead with a vote. In truth, historic burying grounds are a quiet constituency, a matter which underscores the difficulties many communities face in trying to preserve and maintain small publicly-owned historic burial grounds with no family interests and no perpetual care fund in the face of other social and political priorities. Maintenance is down, vandalism is up, and deterioration is omnipresent.

Such was the impetus for the City of Boston's Historic Burying Grounds Initiative which grew out of an awareness voiced after the American Bicentennial by several Boston preservation agencies saying that the effects of age, environment, and deferred maintenance posed an imminent threat of loss to the city's historic burying grounds and thus to the heritage of the city, New England, and the nation. Acknowledging the historical and artistic importance of these sites in Boston's landscape, the Boston Parks

Department, the Boston Landmarks Commission, and the Bostonian Society began a collaborative effort to inventory over 15,000 burial markers. In addition, the effort involved the preparation of a preservation master plan addressing structural landscape and masonry conservation measures in each of the historic cemeteries, assessed by professionals with extensive experience with historic resources. *The Master Plan for Boston's Historic Burying Grounds*, completed in 1985, guided capital improvements, fundraising, and partnerships over the past nine years, and continues to set objectives for their ongoing treatment and management. Over half of the estimated \$6.1 million cost attached to comprehensive rehabilitation has been raised and expended, including public and private funding, a feat which makes it the largest cemetery preservation program in the United States. A regular maintenance program has been instituted by the Parks Department and a full-time preservation planner manages the program, which has been bolstered by the overall rehabilitation of the city's historic park system in the last decade.

Boston's historic burying grounds are important examples of the city's early landscape history, linking contem-

porary Boston with a rich cultural legacy. The Parks Department has 16 historic burying grounds and 3 larger garden-style cemeteries under its jurisdiction which dates between 1630 and 1892, and are located in 13 Boston neighborhoods. Gravemarkers honor founders of Boston's communities, Revolutionary heroes such as Paul Revere, John Hancock, and Samuel Adams, and many more historical figures important to the city's development. The carving methods and motifs used on the historic gravemarkers reflect Puritan and Colonial culture in Boston and offer a glimpse of the 17th- and 18th-centuries stone cutter's art from a period where little else remains in context. Combined with representing relatively unchanged early city landscapes, historic burying grounds also serve as important open spaces in Boston's neighborhoods, often in areas that are densely built.

Recognizing the need for specialized planning services for these unique cultural resources, a first-step inventory provided the necessary foundation of information for interpreting these landscapes, as well as a commitment to achieve creative approaches to their appreciation and appropriate use.

As part of its Historic Burying Grounds Initiative, the Parks Department has worked through its staff of planners and park rangers, and a steadily growing network of community residents, local historical societies, and city educators in developing innovative and site-specific tours, activities, and awareness programs around the history of

Boston's burying grounds, the people buried there, and the rationale behind their preservation.

For the initiative, telling the history and significance of a particular cemetery, by a variety of means, reinforces its preservation mission and stresses the need for community-based involvement. Four of Boston's burying grounds are located along Boston's Freedom Trail sites, such as the Granary Burying Ground (1660), and have no shortage of regular and immediate audiences of students and tourists. This is not the case with the remaining dozen historic burying grounds in the

city's neighborhoods. Reaching audiences of school groups, neighborhood and business associations, youth and elderly organizations, abutters, educators, descendants, and even in-house maintenance crews has required a combination of public programs, community organizing, information distribution, and public relations. This has yielded a network of "friends" organizations and school programs that inform the broader community, but also generate advocacy and funds for the Initiative's ongoing preservation efforts.

Interpretive programs and activities at Boston's historic burying grounds typically take place on a site-by-site basis with the Parks Department as a clearinghouse for program



Bunker Hill Cemetery. One of 19 historic cemeteries and burial grounds under the Boston Park's Historic Burying Ground Initiative. View overlooking Mystic River and Charlestown, MA. Photo by Cheryl Wagner.

support. However, the Department's activities also emphasize the overall system of burying grounds in the city and has actively carried out programs to enlighten area residents to the collection of sites. The initiative has developed a manual for the preservation of these historic burying grounds called *The Boston Experience*, as well as illustrative brochures, fact sheets, and newsletters which give background information on the overall city-wide endeavor.

The interdisciplinary nature of a historic cemetery resource allows the initiative to place the history of sites into a variety of contexts: tree planting and seasonal community clean-ups typically include burying grounds in overall Earth Arbor Day programs; birdwatching has taken place in the larger well-forested cemeteries; art programs that stress sculpture or symbolism as teaching tools are encouraged; and there are straightforward interpretive tours about community history or the site in particular. At all times, within these contexts, the history of the burying grounds and the Historic Burying Grounds Initiative message about the care and preservation of Boston's cemeteries, are emphasized.

For the many thousands of visitors to the Granary Burying Ground in downtown Boston, a pilot interpretive signage program delineates the resting places of historically significant people and the site's development. Reinforced with periodic tours and programs offered by the Parks Department, interpretive signage provides an ongoing basic level of information for the visitor and is the prototype for future installations in other sites. The Granary is also the site for a new program by the city's park rangers, the Parks Department's interpretive unit, called "Granary Ghosts." It uses a team of costumed actors in the roles of Mother Goose, Paul Revere, Samuel Sewell, and Samuel Adams who perform an amusing (and accurate) hour-long program introducing visitors to the burying ground and its "contemporaries."

For several years the Boston park rangers have conducted a school program called "Haunt Jaunts" which are done in many of Boston's historic cemeteries with elementary-level school groups or afternoon school programs. Haunt Jaunts are scavenger hunts of historic burying grounds where children are given a set of questions to pursue such as the oldest and most recent stones, the types of stone to

be found at the site, famous people, tree types, etc. Although popular around Halloween, Haunt Jaunts are offered year-round by request or through direct outreach to nearby schools and community centers. Pre- and post-visit materials are available.

Schools and teachers are, indeed, a desirable audience for educational materials and interpretive programs, particularly since the interdisciplinary nature of historic burying grounds compliments a similar approach to learning and instruction in contemporary schools. Parks Department staff participates with the Boston National Historical Park and Freedom Trail Foundation in a series of Teaching With Historic Resources seminars for Boston public and parochial school teachers. Teachers are given tours of burying grounds, slide presentations on grave-marker art and symbolism, and historical information about the burying grounds in the city so that they may use them as part of their own classroom activities.

For neighborhood associations and business districts, an attractive, well-maintained public site is as important to the perception of a neighborhood as the site's history. As large-scale projects (e.g. new paths and furnishings at the Granary) are implemented through the Initiative, Parks Department staff and consultants meet with neighborhood residents to provide background information on the site, and reasons for certain construction methods, conservation techniques, or plant materials used. As an example, the Parks Department has encouraged the formation of support groups such as the Friends of Bennington Street Cemetery (1841) in East Boston—a group which came together to review plans for a new cemetery fence. They have, in turn, secured neighborhood contributions of more than 20 large trees, and facilitated an adopt-a-grave program for neighborhood boy scouts to research a community ancestor and care for the immediate site. Memorial Day services have also returned to a cemetery which saw its last burial more than 40 years ago.

Since 1990, the Boston Parks Department Tour de Graves, a 40-mile, one-day bicycle tour of the entire system of city cemeteries, has been a popular Halloween activity. This self-guiding tour takes advantage of a very popular mode of transportation—the bicycle—and doubles as an

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Pedestrian circulation was badly eroded and threatening the integrity of the Granary Burial Ground. Walks were paved and edged with a post and chain fence to control visitor overflow and soil compaction. This recent rehabilitation project included a new interpretive signage system. Photo courtesy of Boston Parks Department.



"Logo" for Tour de Grave, the self-guiding bicycle tour of Boston's Burial Grounds (left). Burial Ground Initiative staff provides background information on the history, craftsmanship, and preservation treatment of cemeteries and burial markers (right). Illustration courtesy of Boston Parks Department. Photo by author.

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annual fundraiser and awareness builder. The Parks Department publicizes the event, and generates promotional and educational materials (e.g., guide booklets with maps and basic site information) all of which are given to each registrant. The Tour de Graves is a means by which the entire system of burying grounds in Boston is interpreted. It is an opportunity to learn not only where these significant landscapes are, but why they have been sited in these locations, and their relationship to the growth of the city around them. It has engendered so much interest that parish cemeteries and private garden cemeteries have become involved.

The history of preservation with Boston's 16 historic burying grounds will hopefully be a story in itself for future visitors to Boston's burying grounds. While educa-

tion and outreach should be an end in itself, the Parks Department's efforts in programming historic cemeteries rounds out the initiative's overall plan.

Public involvement is an attractive element of a program which seeks private funding to achieve the preservation of these cultural landscapes. By identifying and implementing treatment and interpretive options for cemeteries as cultural landscapes, including a community outreach component, it is hoped that such a public-private endeavor will produce future stewards for these irreplaceable landscapes—thus ensuring a true long-term strategy of investment in a quiet constituency.

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descendants of early white settlers, or enduring patterns of community life.

The interpretive message addressing how these significant heritage lands are protected is a much easier concept to express. Language regarding the preservation of prairie land through the purchase of scenic easements that limit the development and use of property is understandable. The idea of cooperative efforts between property owners and the NPS to ensure protection of these historic agricultural lands is also not difficult to grasp, but there is never enough room to say what is needed other than the basic premise for the protection and management of the Reserve.

Other means of interpreting the Reserve, some of which are currently in place and others which are merely aspirations, include: a self-guided walking tour; an automobile/driving tour; beach/bluff hike; audio tours; scenic overlooks; and diverse publications, including brochures, a guidebook/handbook, or photographic essays or narrative histories of the area. While some interpretive facilities identified in the Interpretive Prospectus and Wayside Exhibit Plan have not been real-

ized because circumstances have changed since the original plans were devised, other opportunities have become available. With limited funding and staff, the Trust Board has had to take a "go slow" approach in its interpretive program. Ironically, or fortuitously, depending upon one's perspective, this has resulted in higher quality interpretive messages being relayed to the public. Given the unique character of Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve, the type of resources within its boundaries, and its management structure, creative approaches to interpretation within the context of public/private cooperative ventures has been the key to success. To date, the feedback from residents of the Reserve community on the interpretive program has been positive; time will tell whether park visitors are enjoying and learning about the Reserve from the diverse manner in which the interpretive message is disseminated.

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